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Grants fund agritourism

Effort from Red River Gorge to Ohio River

By ALLEN BLAIR / The Independent

Sandy Hook — You don't have to travel to, say, Alaska for an escape from the work-a-day world.

At least not to Dwight Cropper of Greenup County.

How about a cabin or weekend retreat right here at home, he says. With lakes, trails and horseback riding. Or a bed and breakfast, with bird and wildlife watching. Somewhere you can pick your own blueberries for your breakfast cereal.

It's all possible, from Sandy Hook to Greenup, as farm owners look to diversify away from tobacco and cash in on tourism — and Cropper and staff at East Kentucky Foothills Eco-Agritourism (FEAT) Corporation are here to help them do it.

"My emphasis is to get word out to area farmers," said Cropper, project director for FEAT Corp., which covers Wolfe, Menifee, Morgan, Elliott, Carter, Greenup and Lewis counties.

"We will find resources to help them develop on-farm income, especially now as we're pretty much in a post-tobacco era," he said. "There are viable ways to stay on their land, whether it's alternative crops — state parks are now buying local vegetables — or a bed and breakfast or developing ideas to bring visitors onto the farm."

FEAT Corp. is a conglomeration of county officials, UK extension agents, volunteers and others who want to develop a "tourism trail" from the Red River Gorge to the Ohio River.

The Kentucky Agricultural Development Board granted it \$50,000 in tobacco diversification funds for seed money Thursday. As officials gathered for the check presentation at the Laurel Gorge Cultural Heritage Center at Sandy Hook, a stop on the trail, FEAT Corp. director Larry Brown of Wolfe County lauded those who crossed county and political lines to make it happen.

"This a great example of a project we like can help inspire much

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needed regrowth in our state," said Brian Furnish, deputy director of the Governor's Office of Agricultural Policy.

Farmers lost 60 percent of their tobacco quota from 1997 to 2004, he said. Now, a federal buyout has ended the quota system.

This is the second year the ag board has had competitive funding for agritourism, he added.

"I've always been a big believer in, and we've always labeled tourism as Kentucky's third largest industry, but there's so many tourist attractions we've not developed or brought forward," said state Rep. Rocky Adkins, D-Sandy Hook.

The state has been renovating its lodges and parks and has developed new nationally known golf courses, including in Elliott and Lawrence counties, Adkins said.

"The creek just down below here (Laurel) is one of the most beautiful places I have ever been."

FEAT Corp. will boost all that development by helping landowners find ways to capitalize on tourism themselves, he said, by bringing in visitors, by bringing the money back to counties that have until now relied on tobacco.

"I think it's a diamond in the rough," said state Sen. Walter Blevins, D-West Liberty, referring to his home county of Morgan and its surrounding county neighbors.

"Polish it a little bit and I think we've got what everybody in the world wants," he said. "A beautiful place, with great people, they want to visit."

Teresa Brown and Lynn Baker of Olive Hill couldn't agree more. They're state entrepreneurial coaches who've made farm diversification a project and also serve with FEAT Corp.

They will identify interested farmers, their assets and coach them. "Create a whole environment for agritourism in our home county," Brown said.

Overall, the \$50,000 will put FEAT Corp. staff into counties to pull it all together regionally, build Web sites and help those who want apply for state grants of their own, Cropper said.

The Appalachian Regional Commission will provide the corporation a consulting firm, valued at \$40,000, for the effort, said Gwenda Adkins, Elliott County extension agent who's heavily involved with the project.

In the end, Cropper hopes the effort will allow tourists to drive from the Red River Gorge to the Ohio River and stop at destinations such as you-pick farms, weekend retreats, horseback riding and hiking resorts, the heritage center and its trails.

"One fellow already wants to develop ponds on his property," he said. There's a blueberry farm under way in Greenup County.

"And people don't know it but something as innocuous as bird watching generates millions across the country," he said. "Realistically, it will take some time to get established."

But, the places will get more popular as time goes by, said Adkins, who agrees it won't happen overnight.

"This project will grow a piece of the agricultural economy we haven't tapped into yet ... I also think it will make the region of eastern Kentucky a tourist destination and the counties involved will work together rather than compete against each other."

For more information, call FEAT Corp. at (606) 738-5576.

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